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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT GBAGBO DISCUSSES ELECTION DELAY, DDR
ISSUES

REF: A) ABIDJAN 595 B) ABIDJAN 817

Classified By: Ambassador Wanda Nesbitt for Reasons 1.5(B/D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a November 13 meeting with Ambassador, President Gbagbo said he was disappointed that elections have been postponed again but does not see what he can do to speed up the process; the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) needs to work more quickly and effectively. He was calm and matter of fact about the delay but did not appear to be overly worried about it. Gbagbo confirmed that DDR remains stalled while negotiations over how to resolve the issue of grades/ranks continue, and indicated his opposition to two of the Forces Nouvelles (FAFN) key proposals: the transformation of the existing national army (FANCI) into a new structure comprising both forces, and the integration of 5,000 FAFN soldiers into a national force. End Summary

2.(C) Ambassador called on President Gbagbo to discuss the November 10 CPC (Permanent Consultative Framework) meeting in Ouagadougou and when he thought elections might be rescheduled. Gbagbo said the CPC meeting was not at all contentious; the participants readily agreed that the election had to be postponed because the voter registration process was nowhere near complete. Gbagbo said that no one had tried to defend the CEI, and his analysis was that the CEI had made the mistake of trying to create an entirely new structure of its own instead of drawing on existing structures, such as the INS (National Institute of Statistics) and civil servants posted around the country. Gbagbo claimed that CEI president Mambe had made no effort to solicit the assistance of the regional prefects until October. He expected the CEI to work more closely with local officials now that the CPC had encouraged them to do so. The president reminded Ambassador that the electoral commission is comprised mainly of politicians who do not have a lot of technical expertise (see ref A), and is dominated by the opposition. He said he had not insisted that the CEI work more closely with the Ministry of Interior, the department that oversees the prefectural system (and is headed by one of Gbagbo's closest allies), because he had not wanted to appear to be imposing conditions or accused of trying to compromise the electoral commission's independence.

¶3. (C) President Gbagbo would not speculate about when the election might take place. He told Ambassador that he was disturbed by the delay but did not see that he could do much about it. Ambassador stressed to Gbagbo that the US wants to see elections take place as soon as possible, noting that Cote d'Ivoire could not move forward on many development issues as long as there is a perception that the country is still in crisis. Gbagbo agreed and said that one of his greatest frustrations is that he cannot truly govern with a national unity cabinet; too many of the ministers pay allegiance to the opposition and have no desire to help the current government succeed. Ambassador told Gbagbo that she had met the previous week with Finance Minister Diby to discuss HIPC debt relief and the improvements that Cote d'Ivoire needed to make to reach the decision point. Somewhat surprisingly, the president appeared to view it as a technical issue and merely encouraged Ambassador to continue her discussions with the Finance Minister.

¶4. (C) Ambassador asked the president if any progress had been made on DDR issues at the CPC. Gbagbo's response was

that negotiations are continuing. He said that he does not agree with the Forces Nouvelles (FAFN) that the country needs a "new" army. (Note: the FAFN's position has been that it will join a new army but will not 'return' to the FANCI.) "We already have an army", Gbagbo said. The president also said that the FANCI could not absorb 5,000 soldiers, the number the FAFN wants to contribute to a new force. Gbagbo said that the ethnic composition of the army would be skewed too heavily towards northerners were the FANCI to take in 5,000; he thought 2,500 might be reasonable. Gbagbo also reiterated his view that the Comzones must depart before the election and that disarmament should be largely completed before the election as well. He did not, however, explain how this could happen if the grades/ranks issue is not resolved soon.

15. (C) Comment: The president seemed very relaxed and talkative but deliberately skirted the question of when an election might take place. He congratulated the US on holding an exemplary and historic election, and gave Ambassador the text of an article he wrote himself on the importance of the US election. Although he said all the right things, Gbagbo did not appear to be genuinely concerned about the election delay. Nor did he appear to be interested in discussing HIPC debt relief. In fact, Gbagbo gave the impression of being satisfied that things were going very much his way. The creation of a new army has been a critical issue for the Forces Nouvelles and Gbagbo's rejection of the concept could prove to be a serious stumbling block to progress on DDR. End Comment

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